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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development: Priority theme: "Promoting social integration and participation of all people, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons"

Statement submitted by Information Habitat: Where Information Lives, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Information technology, public participation and global agreements

As the information revolution gains momentum – a revolution widely acknowledged to be on the order of magnitude of the industrial revolution, it is critical that the Commission on Social Development and Member States identify ways and means to undertake timely, broad-based and systematic consultations to examine social and other implications and opportunities relating to the adoption and use of information technologies.

The new information technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for broad-based participation in governance at local, national and global levels as well as the possibilities of costs-effectiveness ease of access to public information. However, in the absence of timely public policy initiatives and in the context of rapidly growing adoption of the technologies governed almost exclusively by market forces, there are high risks of

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consolidation of a process of globalization that would widen the gulf between the information rich and the information poor, and that would have profound negative implications for equitable and sustainable social development.

Information and communication technologies are the primary enabling mechanisms for economic globalization, a process that is very rapidly being translated into binding and legally enforceable international agreements – agreements that are being negotiated and entered into force with virtually no opportunity for public participation. As a result, the "constitution of a single global economy" – a phrase used by the Director of the World Trade Organization to describe the pending Multilateral Agreement on Investment – is being finalized in a context in which there is no framework that allows economic interests to be balanced with consideration of social – or environmental – concerns.[1] As it stands, the Multilateral Agreement would subject local and national Governments to legal obligations to protect corporate property interests against, *inter alia*, hypothetical loss of profits resulting from governmental policy as well as from economic loss caused by strife or social unrest and would override incompatible local and national laws and regulations.

There is widespread and growing concern in the non-governmental community, especially in developing countries, that the adoption of the Multilateral Agreement, in its present form, in May 1998, would lock into place a body of enforceable law that would, *inter alia*, undermine the implementation of the agreements arrived at in recent global conferences, including the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development.

Meanwhile, the use of information technology has been evolving as a key enabling mechanism in the development of global civil society, especially in the context of agreements of, and follow-up to, recent global conferences. Among examples of note to date has been the progressive development of a partnership-based online framework to enable monitoring and implementation of the Habitat Agenda (see http://unhabitat.org/partners) and follow-up to Agenda 21, where the NGO Steering Committee for the Commission on Sustainable Development called for identification of "critical information ecology issues" and for:

> "... the design and establishment of, and support for, participatory enabling environments – from community and interlocal networks to national and global frameworks – within which information and communications technologies, systems and processes – including traditional and non-electronic forms – can facilitate a transition to more open, equitable and sustainable communities and society".[2]

The urgency of that call is underscored by the present need to address the Multilateral Agreement before it is too late. There is an immediate need to institute consultations on the feasibility, design and implementation of broad-based information ecology processes and frameworks to facilitate public dialogue and deliberation on the implications of the Multilateral Agreement and to seek a forum in which its terms and conditions can be reconciled with the conditions that are needed for the implementation of the agreements of the Social Summit and of other recent global conferences. Such a forum could provide a historic opportunity for a millennial process of global agreement that could provide a foundation for sustainable and equitable human development.

These consultations should uphold a goal of enabling participation that is not subject to restrictions based on age, ability, gender, geographical location, or cultural, religious or political background. The consultation process could also fruitfully address the development of an integrated framework to enable the implementation of the global agreements – for example, along the lines of the Partnership, Informatics and Participation project of the NGO

Committee on Human Settlements,[3] as well as on the preparations for a Peoples Millennium Assembly and/or Non-Governmental Millennium forum, in response to the Secretary-General's invitation in his proposal "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform".[4]

Notes

[1] Information on the Multilateral Agreement on Investment is accessible on the World Wide Web at http //www infohabitat org/mai

[2] "Recommendations for action and commitments at Earth Summit II 4 4 Information ecology" (http //www infohabitat org/csd-97/ie html)

[3] See http //www infohabitat org/ngochs

[4] A/51/950 (http //www un org/reform/track2/initiate htm)